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ABSTRACT

This publication provides advice and guidance to local governments that are considering hiring a records management consultant. Such consultants can play a beneficial role in improving local government records management programs. However, local governments should not become overly dependent on consultants for routine or continuing work that should be carried out by the government's own staff. Once the need for a consultant has been carefully established, detailed job specifications should be written, with information about the government, project goals, qualifications needed, compensation, etcetera. A number of methods for soliciting proposals and selecting a consultant are described, and information concerning reporting requirements and the preparation of agreements for consulting services are presented. Assistance available through the New York State Archives and Records Administration is described. (SLD)

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Records Management Consultants for Local Governments

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Local Government Records Services

Local Government Records Technical Information Series No. 44

Introduction

Records management consultants can play a beneficial role in improving local government records management programs. They can pinpoint problems and recommend solutions. Consultants can also help implement recommendations or assist local government staff in gaining the records management expertise to do so. This publication provides advice and guidance to local governments that are considering hiring a consultant. It will assist those local governments that are seeking, or that already have, grants from the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund to engage consultants. However, it is intended to assist all local governments that are considering hiring consultants, whether on grant-funded projects or on the local governments' own resources.

For local governments with records management expertise, consultants can still be of great value. They may have proficiency in specific areas (e.g., electronic records, micrographics, inventory, or conservation) or may provide information on the purchase of specialized equipment. They can carry out projects local governments cannot carry out by themselves. As an independent expert, a consultant can also help promote records management to administrative officials. On the other hand, consultants are often expensive. Furthermore, local governments should not become overly dependent on consultants for routine or continuing work that should be carried out by government's own staff. Most records management activities should be handled by regular local government staff, not consultants.

Local governments should be particularly cautious about engaging a consultant to prepare one grant application after another and carry out one project after another. This perpetuates the local government's reliance on an outside consultant rather than developing its own internal expertise and capacity to take care of its own records management needs on a continuing basis. Local governments should

avoid situations which encourage the consultant to focus in a self-interested manner on the next project, and the one after that, rather than to provide the local government with the guidance and expertise it needs to develop a program and then proceed on its own. Multiple consultants' grant applications from the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund are discouraged unless the need is compelling and the justification is extremely convincing.

Considerations Before Hiring a Consultant

A good time to determine whether to hire a consultant can be during development of a records management program, or during formal review of an established program. If a records inventory and needs assessment are already in place, and a program plan in progress, particular concerns will already be identified. A consultant should be hired only when particular expertise is needed that local government employees do not have or cannot readily acquire. For instance, a local government with a microfilm expert on staff will probably not need a consultant to plan and carry out a microfilm program. In addition, much of the information local governments need is readily available, free of charge, from the State Archives and Records Administration (SARA). SARA maintains offices in all regions of the State and its Regional Advisory Officers (RAOs) consult with local governments and assist them in addressing problems. SARA also offers regional workshops on records management topics and has available a series of technical publications.

It is useful to distinguish between consultants, who bring particular experience and expertise, and supplementary or contract help. For instance, a consultant can guide a local government in planning a records inventory and in assessing the results, but the local government might hire other people to do the work. The cost of their work might be significantly less than would be required for a consultant. Often, the people needed aren't really providing "consultation;" they are just carrying out some of the work.

In assessing whether local expertise is sufficient for a particular task or initiative, the Records Management Officer (RMO) and local government officials should ask themselves:

- ❒ *"Are there employees with records management expertise, who can work with the RMO to solve records management problems?"*
- ❒ *"Can administrators provide enough time for the employees to help solve the records management problem(s)?"*
- ❒ *"Have we worked with the State Archives and Records Administration (SARA) Regional Advisory Officer (RAO)?"*

- *"Are there other governments with similar concerns with whom we can share ideas?"*
- *"Have we sought assistance from SARA leaflets and workshops, other State agencies, and professional organizations?"*

Why Hire a Consultant?

Though the answers to some questions above might be *yes*, local governments may still want a consultant for several reasons:

- A consultant can provide an objective view of the records management system, identify problem areas possibly overlooked, and recommend improvements.
- A consultant can organize and supervise studies relevant to records management program weaknesses, analyze the data, and report on the findings.
- Standard records management practices can be explained and set in place by a consultant.
- A consultant can tackle specific tasks like microfilm quality control or preservation of archival records.
- As an outside expert, a consultant can help attain employee acceptance of records management initiatives.
- Hiring an outside professional will increase the likelihood that management will accept and implement recommendations.
- A consultant is often familiar with similar concerns in other locales and can bring that knowledge and experience to the project.
- Training staff as a component of the consultant's contract ensures self-sufficiency once the consultant leaves.

As noted above, local governments need to balance the pros and cons before deciding whether a consultant is needed. For initiatives of limited scope and duration, where technical expertise is needed that the local government does not have, and where resources are available, a consultant may well be the answer. For continuing, routine work, however, where local expertise is available or where it could and should be developed, local governments are advised to use their own resources, and to seek advice and assistance from SARA, rather than from a consultant supported by grant funds.

Writing Specifications

Before hiring a consultant, detailed job specifications should be written to ensure appropriate responses from the applicants. The specifications should be clear, well developed, and logically arranged. A table of contents and task initiation and completion schedules will strengthen the document.

The specifications should address:

- **Information on the Local Government.** Include the size, geography and population distribution, a brief administrative history, and an organizational chart.
- **Goals of the Project.** Discuss the project's mission, goals, and objectives.
- **Consultant's Responsibilities.** Outline clearly what is expected from the consultant.
- **Consultant's Qualifications.** List the educational background, records management experience, and relevant skills required for the consultant. Define project dates to ensure applicant's availability. Request references on professional performance. (Make sure to check the qualifications of any subcontractors the consultant may use.)
- **Payment.** State the specific fee, or range of fees, budgeted for the consultant's work on the project. Indicate whether your local government will pay for travel expenses or if such costs are the consultant's responsibility. Outline the payment schedule, designating that a substantial percentage of the fees will be paid **upon satisfactory completion of duties**. If this is a Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund (LGRMIF) grant project, check the current SARA guidelines regarding maximum dollar amount paid per day.
- **Response Deadline.** Include a deadline by which candidates must indicate interest in handling the project.
- **Further Information.** List people the consultant can contact for specification queries. Make sure the contacts have working knowledge of the records management program and of the consultant's duties.

Soliciting Proposals

There are a number of methods for proposal solicitation:

- **Announcements at Professional Meetings.** Advertise for a consultant at professional meetings - local chapters of the

Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA), Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (MARAC), Association for Image and Information Management (AIIM); by public announcements; and by written notices on bulletin boards. Contact colleagues who are members of the New York Association of Local Government Records Officers (NYALGRO), the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA), the Society of American Archivists (SAA), or the American Institute for Conservation (AIC). Networking at meetings is an effective way to solicit information concerning local consultants. Check your local government's regulations, or consult with counsel, to determine if there are other advertising requirements.

- ❒ **Contact With Other Local Governments.** Communicate with other local governments in the area. Share resource lists (including consultant names and references) and information on records management projects.

- ❒ **Contact With SARA Regional Advisory Officers (RAOs).** The RAOs of the State Archives and Records Administration (SARA) can refer a local government to others that have completed similar projects using consultants. The RAO can help determine the consultant skills required for the project but may not recommend specific people.

Selecting a Consultant

Once a list of candidates exists, the selection process can begin. Choosing a consultant involves several important steps:

- ❒ **Planning the Interview.** Decide which staff members will participate in the interview process. Develop standard questions to ask each candidate after prioritizing required consultant skills (records management, communication, analytical, etc.). Set limits for fees and other support that are acceptable to the local government.

- ❒ **After the Interview.** Evaluate the interview - did the candidate exhibit strong records management skills and experience? How closely did the candidate's records management experience relate to the project? Has the experience been extensive or short-term? Has it been with one employer or with several? Did the candidate communicate well and demonstrate professional concern and interest? What methods did the consultant employ to carry out the project and did they seem effective and smoothly executed? Contact references, recognizing that they will usually be positive. Telephone references are often more revealing than written ones.

The Agreement

After selecting a consultant, formalize the proposal by stating all requirements and objectives in a contract. This contract will serve to protect the local government and to eliminate possible misunderstandings. The agreement should carefully detail the responsibilities of both the consultant and the local government. Generally, the consultant will recommend options and directions, conduct interviews, propose and develop plans, present them to government executives or governing bodies, supervise project implementation, analyze results and prepare written reports based upon these analyses. The local government responsibilities may include gathering data, handling routine project tasks and planning how to put the recommendations in place. Always have legal counsel draft and execute the agreement.

A written contract should detail all project steps and contain the following:

- ❒ **Project Summary.** Outline the scope of the project and its goals and objectives. Also include specific data, such as the number of cubic feet of records earmarked for inventorying and analysis and the particular volumes needing deacidification. This data will clarify the consultant's responsibilities and serve later as a benchmark for measuring project effectiveness.

- ❒ **Plan of Work.** Outline the specific steps of the project and who will be responsible for each. Also note how many people will work on the project, the skills they require, and whether the local government or the consultant will provide this personnel. Keep in mind that the products of the project must be in a format compatible with the local government operation; for example, don't produce microfilm if there are no reader/printers.

- ❒ **Timeline.** Illustrate the beginning and ending dates of each project element on a timeline. Include meeting dates for introduction of the project to employees, for progress reports, and for interim and final written reports.

- ❒ **Budget.** Include a payment schedule and delineate any support the local government will provide the consultant during the project: office space, equipment (e.g., word processors, photocopiers), support staff, etc.

- ❒ **Personnel.** If the consultant will be providing project support staff, make sure the hours support staff work are distinguished from those worked by technical or professional staff.

Have legal counsel draft statements on liability, insurance, equal employment opportunity, and other standard agreement language for

the contract. Carefully review the contract with legal counsel prior to signing.

Reporting Requirements

Consultant reports should serve as a measuring tool of the effectiveness of the consultant's performance and a vehicle for improvement of the records management program. They include budget reports and narrative project reports. The latter can include status reports, an interim project report, and a final report. Depending on the nature of the consultant's work, the following should be required:

- **Budget Reports.** These can be brief and may double as invoices. In addition to noting amount due, these reports should outline tasks completed, hours spent on each and by whom, and reflect the pay rate specified for the work in the contract.

- **Narrative Reports.**

  - Status reports: These reports should be concise and adhere to a specific time schedule. They should outline the project's progress as compared to the plan of work and timeline. An inventory project status report, for example, would list departments inventoried and the number of cubic feet of inventoried records. An interim project report presented halfway through the project can summarize the project status and provide an opportunity for plan of work revision.

  - Final Project Report: This report should include the following:

    - Introduction: State the project's goals and intended results.

    - Methodology: Summarize how the consultant completed project tasks. This section allows a local government to reconstruct steps taken during the project and to implement recommendations effectively.

    - Summary of results: Summarize the benefits the project achieved and report on the work accomplished. This section can include estimates of cost avoidance; for example, how much cost was avoided by destruction of obsolete records and reuse of filing equipment during the project. The section should also outline any benefits realized from implementation of the consultant's recommendations and plans for future action. The consultant should reveal the methods used to arrive at conclusions and include specific data on results, such as cubic feet of records inventoried. The consultant should draft a final project report in time for document review and revision before presentation to local government officials or to SARA, if supported by a LGRMIF grant.

- Needs assessment and recommendations: Discuss problems uncovered during the project and possible solutions for future consideration.
- Plan: Recommend both short-term and long-term records management actions for the local government to take.

For More Information and Assistance

The State Archives and Records Administration provides records management services to local governments including technical advice and assistance, publications, training and presentations, and consultations with local officials concerning records and information management issues. SARA has regional offices throughout the State; each office has an expert records specialist who can visit local governments and provide on-the-spot advice. These services are supported by the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund. For further information, contact your regional office or the following:

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